

Introducing the Generation Brexit project – a chance for millennials to shape Brexit

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2017/06/23/youth-dont-vote-is-the-brexit-generation-changing-that/

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*Young people don't vote – or that was the conventional wisdom. However, polling data from the 2017 UK General Election suggest an unprecedented youth turnout, especially when compared with the Brexit vote. **Jennifer Jackson-Preece** and **Roch Dunin-Wąsowicz** introduce the [Generation Brexit](#) project, which addresses the politicisation of millennials. This LSE-based project will give a voice to the millennial generation that until recently has been largely disengaged from politics.*



Between 1992-2005, youth turnout in UK general elections fell from 66 per cent to 38 per cent, only [slightly recovering](#) (to 49 per cent) in 2010. While young people may sign a petition or engage in some other form of political activism, they are happy to let their parents and grandparents choose the next government. Any political party that targets young voters is wasting its time. In an election, appealing to the grey vote is what really matters. This reality explains why Brexit is being negotiated by [two grey-haired men](#) with an average age of 67! Democracy is, for all intents and purposes, a gerontocracy in which the old exercise power over the young.



That was the conventional wisdom. It has now been overturned by events. The UK has just experienced what pundits are calling a '[youthquake](#)'. Early polling data from the 2017 UK General Election suggested that turnout among 18-24-year-olds surged to between [66](#) and [72](#) per cent. Subsequent post-election analysis indicates that the true turnout may have been closer to [58](#) per cent. But even this revised figure is significantly higher than the [43](#) per cent turnout in the 2015 UK General Election.

Even more remarkably, this increasing youth vote is not confined to the UK. Within the last twelve months, young voters have played a more important role in three major national elections. They had an impact on both the 2017 French presidential elections and the 2016 US presidential election. Millennials have finally woken up to the reality that real political change is only achieved through the ballot box.

Millennials are the generation born between 1980-2000. They are the children of the 'Baby Boomers' (born 1946-1964), now aged 53-71, and follow Generation X (born 1965-1979), now aged 38-52. Millennials, sometimes also known as Generation Y, are the first generation to come of age in the new millennium – hence their name.

| *Young people are an important political constituency*

The idea that birth cohorts (generations) are an important reference point for understanding processes of social and political change has a long and distinguished academic pedigree. It can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophers ([Nash's 'Greek Origins of Generational Thought'](#)). Mannheim's 1923 essay '[The Problem of Generations](#)' introduced this concept into sociology. More recently, the generational approach was popularised by William Strauss and Neil Howe in their 1991 book [Generations](#).

All of these various studies share the belief that age cohort is a sociologically significant variable because it highlights 'the relationship between personal and social change and the intersection of biography and history' ([Pilcher's 'Mannheim's sociology of generations: an undervalued legacy'](#)). Much like social class, the concept of a generation also allows us to interrogate commonalities and differences amongst a group of people of similar (in this

case age defined) status. And such commonalities and differences are becoming increasingly salient.



As YouGov has noted, ‘age seems to be the new dividing line in British politics’. Generational differences have been vividly revealed in recent British, French and US elections precisely because millennials in all three states believe their future prospects are worse than those of their parents at a similar age. And they are right. As the [Guardian pointed out](#) in 2016: ‘A combination of debt, joblessness, globalisation, demographics and rising house prices is depressing the incomes and prospects of millions of young people across the developed world, resulting in unprecedented inequality between generations.’

Gerontocracy is not democracy

Little wonder then that millennials have different voting preferences than those of older cohorts. In the [2016 EU referendum](#), the youngest voters (18-24) were 73 per cent in favour of Remain – in stark contrast with over-65s, who voted 60 per cent to Leave. A year later, in the 2017 UK General Election, grandchildren were overwhelmingly pro-Labour while their grandparents were equally keen on the Conservatives. Labour was 47 percentage points ahead amongst first-time voters (18-19-year-olds), while the Conservatives had a lead of [50 percentage points](#) among those aged over 70.

The lesson here is clear: young people are an important political constituency. Older generations, including most politicians, ignore them at their peril. In this respect, we could all learn a thing or two from what Jeremy Corbyn did right – and, perhaps even more importantly, from what Theresa May did wrong. Young people have a voice. Young people have a vote. Young people must be listened to. Gerontocracy is not democracy.

Generation Brexit will make young people’s voices heard in the Brexit negotiations

[Generation Brexit](#) is an exciting new public engagement project, based at the LSE’s European Institute. that aims to make young people’s voices heard in the Brexit negotiations. [Generation Brexit](#) will crowdsource a millennial cohort vision for the future relationship between the UK and the EU. It invites those aged 35 and under from across the UK

and Europe to debate, decide, and draft policy proposals that will be sent to Parliaments in Westminster and Brussels throughout the negotiations. It is especially keen to engage the forgotten, the apolitical and the apathetic – those for whom Brexit has become a moment of political awakening. The project translates academic research findings into impactful and policy-relevant arguments. Unlike other Brexit-related engagement initiatives, this project targets millennials in the UK and in Europe alike. The pan-European dimension captures the reality of the Brexit negotiations. It also underscores the necessity of establishing a mutually beneficial relationship for the future, built on shared ideas from that cohort of current voters who will live with them the longest.

In the wake of the Brexit vote, which reinforced the generational divide over politics, and because of increased youth turnout in GE17, millennial political engagement is more vital than ever. [Generation Brexit](#) offers one solution to this. Launching on 23 June 2017 at 2 pm (BST), the first anniversary of the EU referendum, it will address these issues through crowdsourcing, research and policy impact. As well as [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), it can be found at generationbrexit.org.

This blog represents the views of the author and not those of LSE Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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